

NICK CARTER WEEKLY

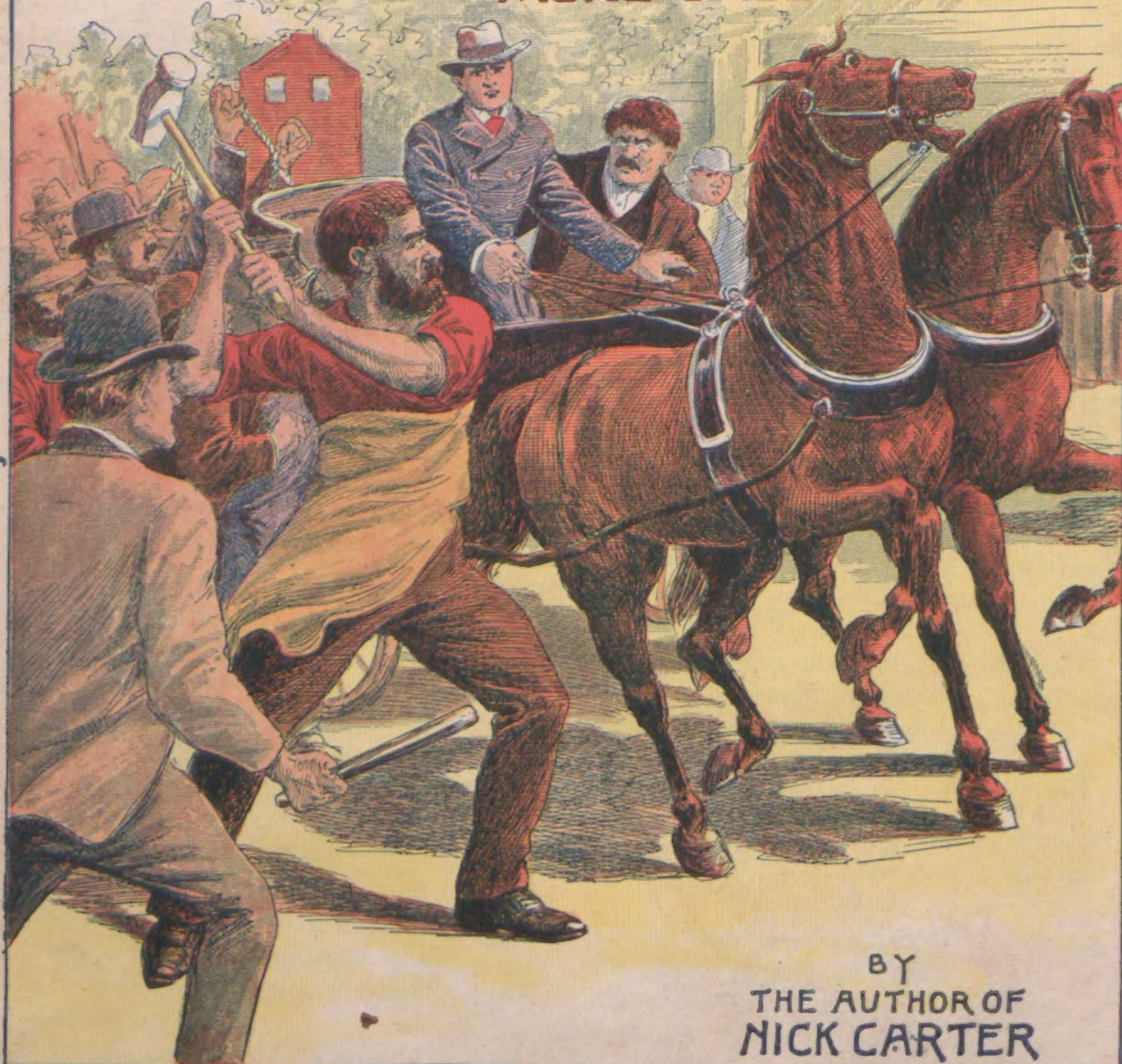
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NICK CARTER'S CURIOUS CLIENT

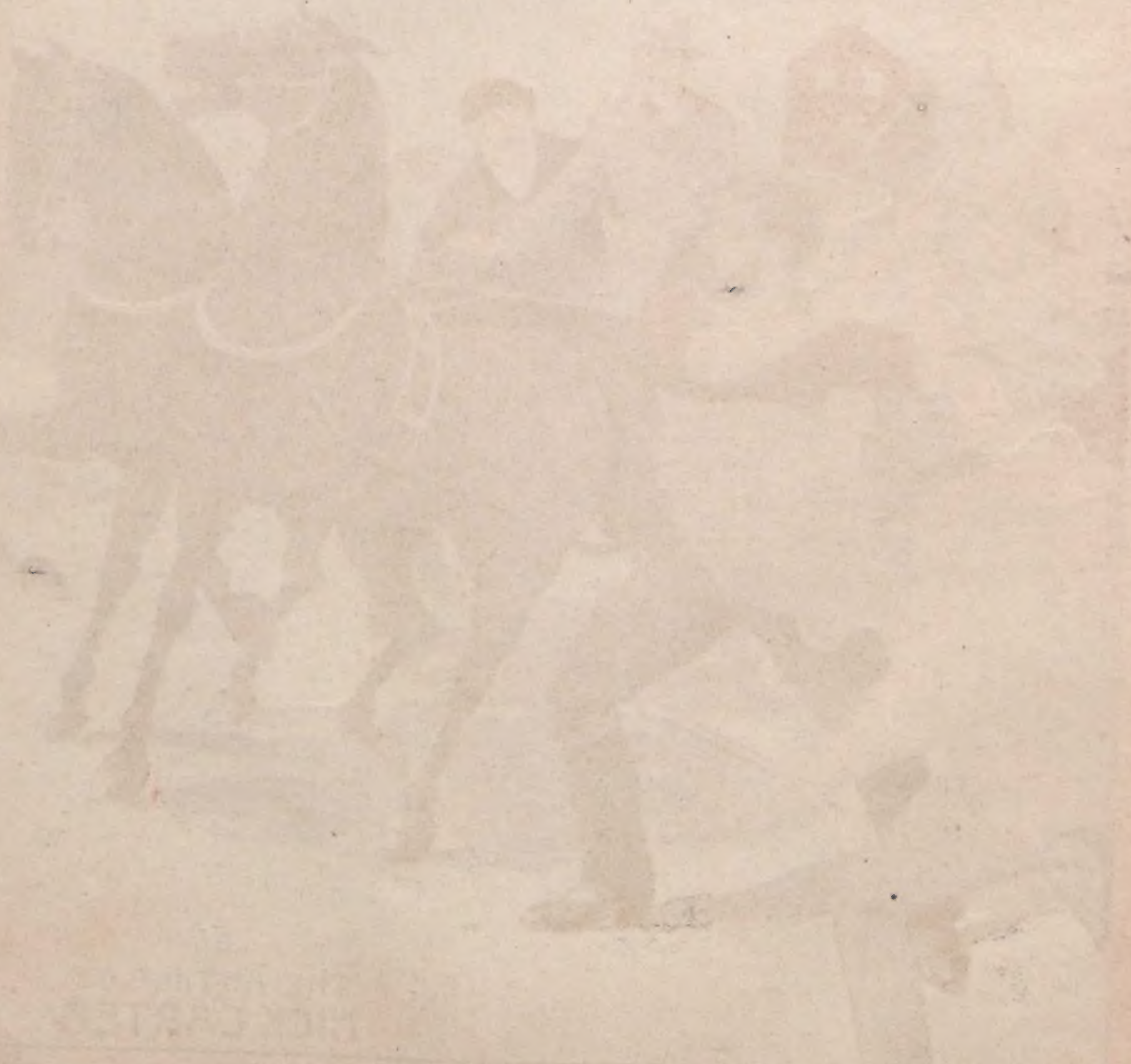
OR A CRIMINAL WITH
MORE GALL THAN SENSE



BY
THE AUTHOR OF
NICK CARTER

NICK AND HIS PRISONER WERE SURROUNDED BY THE LYNCHING MOB. A BLACKSMITH STRIKES THE HORSE WITH A SLEDGEHAMMER.

RECEIVED
OR A CRIMINAL WITH
MORE CALL TALKERS



A New story, written specially for the Nick Carter Weekly, and will not appear in any other number.

NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

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Nick Carter's Curious Client

OR,

A CRIMINAL WITH MORE GALL THAN SENSE

By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

THE OVERLAND LIMITED.

The private car, Semiramis, stood on a switch in the Erie Railroad yards, Jersey City, one frosty December morning.

It had arrived with the Overland limited at three a. m.

It was now five hours later, and, pursuant to his usual custom, the foreman having charge of the passenger yards moved down with his gang upon the newly arrived cars.

The scrub-women, the hosemen and the supply force were already in possession of the day coaches.

It was their regular province to air and prepare the same preliminary to renovation—sweeping, dusting and general cleaning up.

In advance of this group, a workman of skill and experience—the pilot of the

repairing force—made inspection of the running gear.

The foreman kept up with him.

He had a piece of chalk in his hand, and as the workman burrowed under the various cars and then came from under them again, he would chronicle the results of his investigations.

That is, upon the statement of his subordinate, he would chalk on the trucks those cabalistic signs which are often puzzling to the public, but are easily understood by his own craft.

Such stood for: "Broken spring," "defective wheels," "hot box," "twisted axle."

The workman, hammer in hand, had now reached the private car.

The foreman chatted with him in a casual way as he gave resounding taps to this and that wheel.

The Semiramis, for all its beautiful

exterior of high color and ornate decoration, was dirt-laden and travel-stained in the extreme.

In its recent whirl of some three thousand miles across the continent, it was apparent that it had passed through various climatic conditions.

Rain had drenched, snow had-splotched—sand, alkali, clay and loam could be traced in layers quite distinct even to the naked eye.

The Semiramis resembled a palace on wheels shut up for the season.

All the inside curtains were down, the screen ventilators on top were tightly closed.

The platform doors held against their thresholds little drifts of cinders and mud, undisturbed by entrance or exit.

This car stood apart from the other coaches, and the foreman walked around it with his subordinate.

The latter came to the forward trucks, tapping the wheels with his hammer, and perfunctorily uttering:

"All right."

Then he dove under the centre, bending low to pass ungrazed the surfaces depending from the floor bottom of the coach.

"Empty?" his voice sounded out muffled and hollow as he pursued his explorations.

"Of course," answered the foreman.

"Clear from the coast?"

"Yes."

"How is that?"

"Took out the V. P. and family."

"Indeed."

"En route for a voyage to the Sandwich Islands."

"I see."

Tap! tap!

"Come back unloaded. How did she stand the racket?"

"She stood it well."

"Everything in order?"

"Yes. Heavens!"

The foreman naturally supposed that the workman had hit his head against some loose or unguarded nut or bar.

He bent forward slightly to trace the trouble, and his eyes stared somewhat

Almost prone the workman had dropped, and on his knees and one hand he was creeping out from between the rails.

"What is the matter?" inquired the foreman.

The other did not immediately reply.

His companion noticed that his face was disturbed.

The workman panted as though some deep emotion stirred him.

"Why, you look pale!" exclaimed the foreman as his subordinate came completely into view.

"I feel—pale!" gasped the other.

"Hurt?"

"No—scared!"

"What?"

"Look"

The workman held up the hand he had not put on the ground.

It still clasped the hammer, but in a nervous grip, and it shook visibly.

A great splotch marked the back of that hand and it was spreading slowly.

"Grease?" asked the foreman in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Blood!" uttered the other with tragic emphasis.

"What?"

"It is, sure."

"Where from?"

"Under there."

"Yes, but where under there?"

"From inside the car."

"Eh?"

"I know it! Come and see."

The workman dropped his hammer and bent under the car again.

The foreman promptly followed him.

His eyes began to scintillate as he followed the rather timorous indication of the pointing finger of his companion.

Upon the roadbed, under a long box-like extension of the bottom of the car was a dull-colored puddle.

Near the centre of this box-like contrivance was something of a crack.

Pendant from this were several slowly lengthening and dropping globules.

"Right!" observed the foreman, sententiously.

"What causes it?" questioned the workman in an agitated tone.

"We shall see."

Both emerged from under the car and stood erect.

The foreman looked serious—his companion curious and expectant.

"Wait a bit here," said the former, with a sense of importance.

He hastily left the scene, headed in the direction of his office, some three hundred yards distant.

He shortly returned, examining individually the marks on a great bunch of keys he bore.

"Semiramis," he read, as he came near his companion.

"Got the key to this car?"

"I have."

"Shall I look with you?"

"Of course."

They ascended the rear platform. The foreman fitted the key.

It grated harshly, cracking brittle particles of sand and cinder that clung to the keyhole.

The door opened; first they reached the vestibule, next a side corridor.

They now stood in the body of the car.

Everything was neat, clean, in order, except that a stuffy taint oppressed the air.

"More forward," suggested the workman.

"Yes," nodded his companion.

A frosted glass door led into the sleeping compartment of the car—a double state-room.

The foreman gave the door a push in-

wards. Something hindered it from going open more than half a foot.

He intruded his head to make out the obstacle.

Quickly withdrawing it, his face becoming ashen in a second, he repeated the recent vehement utterance of his companion:

"Heavens!"

"You've found out?" eagerly interrogated the workman.

"Yes!" gasped the other.

"Here—pull the door this way; it opens both ways; it——"

The foreman had sunk back to a seat brace, quite overcome.

The workman's utterance was abruptly checked, and he stood holding the door ajar, but like one petrified.

Beside a luxurious lounging chair, from which it had evidently slipped to the floor of the car, was a human form.

The head reclined as if pillowed on the soft velvet chair cushion, so that the face was in full view.

It was a young and a beautiful face—that of a girl not more than eighteen years of age.

Radiant loveliness was there, and apparent innocence. But the half-opened eyes bore no expression, and the parted lips were rigid.

"Dead!" gasped the workman in profound stupefaction.

"Murdered!" echoed his companion.

Then determinedly, though in a tremulous voice, he added:

"Come—this is no matter for you or me to tamper with."

"What are you going to do?"

"Send for the police!"

CHAPTER II.

HUNTING FOR A CLEW.

The two railway employees were old and experienced attaches of the service.

They comprehended the value of si-

lence when an accident or a collision occurred.

The foreman applied this same time-honored restriction to the present case.

He took the workman with him, and in ten minutes was in conference with the superintendent of the road.

There was some excitement and a hasty discussion. The police were wired.

The captain of the nearest station soon arrived with two men.

He visited the car, came out, locked the door and kept the key.

He gave some whispered instructions to his subordinates. They flitted away, and he accompanied the foreman to his office.

"What next, sir?" the latter ventured to inquire.

He was greatly wrought up by the reserve and composure of the captain in this initial investigation.

"I am waiting," replied the officer, briefly.

"Might I ask what for?"

"An expert."

"Ah! I agree with you."

"Indeed!"

"Yes—this is certainly a case out of the common. It will take a shrewd man to learn its ins and outs."

"I have sent for a shrewd man."

The "shrewd man" in question arrived within an hour.

He came by a cab, and the foreman, gazing from the window of his office, turned to the imperturbable police official with a quickly flushing face.

"He'll do!" he declared, with enthusiasm.

"You quite consent, do you?"

"Consent to his handling the case—consent to Nick Carter? Well, slightly," answered the foreman with fervor, never noting the sarcasm in the other's tone.

The famous New York detective en-

tered the building with his usual firm, brisk tread.

He never interrupted as the captain, taking him aside, spoke rapidly for some ten minutes.

He ended by pointing to the yard foreman, touched his cap to the secret service expert, and left the office and the scene.

The police captain had given Nick the key to the private car.

Nick advanced toward the foreman, displaying it.

"I understand," said the latter, with a deference that told Nick that he was recognized, and led the way into the yards.

Nick made a movement that somewhat upset his companion as they neared the Semiramis.

One of the workmen was uncoiling his hose, to get ready to play on the private coach.

"Stop that!" ordered the detective, sharply, and the man stared. "Do not let any unauthorized person approach that car till I give orders," Nick added to the foreman.

"No, sir."

"Much less, disturb it."

The foreman spoke to the man, who at once withdrew from the spot. He accompanied the detective into the car. Nick reached the state-room, braced the door open, waved back his on-pressing companion and stood just on the threshold, peering in.

One glance, strengthening a previously formed intuitive conclusion suggested by what he had heard, convinced the great mystery-solver that there was one of those strange and clewless tragedies that meant hard and possibly fruitless work.

Nick approached the dead figure, after he had studied the pose and surroundings for some moments.

He bent down a neat lace collar, and

disclosed the death wound—a deep, wide cut at the side of the throat.

The blood from this covered the floor—even soaking across and trickling beyond a strip of carpet.

Nick pulled this aside, and discovered a two-doored trap, with a slight crack where the sections met at the centre.

Nick pulled up one door, and looked down into a box-like extension under the car.

He turned to the foreman now, who had watched his face and movements with rapt interest from the start.

Nick penciled on a card, and handed the card to the man.

"You have a telephone at your office, I believe?" he said.

"Yes, sir."

"Reach this party as quickly as possible."

The foreman glanced at the card.

It noted the detective's own home quarters, and it named the detective's favorite assistant—Chick.

"What am I to tell him, sir?" asked the foreman.

"To drop everything and come here at once."

"It shall be done."

The foreman was gone for about an hour.

When he returned, he was accompanied to the car by the person Nick had sent for.

The foreman did not know how much time Nick had spent inside the car.

He found him now just crawling out from under it.

The detective had half a dozen envelopes in his hand.

These seemed to contain some slight substance that did not nearly fill them.

Nick folded their flaps carefully, surrounding them with elastic bands, and placed them in his pocket.

To Chick he nodded in a way that instantly conveyed to his keen associate

that he had completed a thorough investigation, and that there was nothing to discuss till they were by themselves.

To the foreman Nick handed the key.

"The police will soon come for the body," he briefly stated.

Nick turned on his heel, taking Chick's arm.

"Mr. Carter!"

"Yes," inquired Nick, facing the foreman again.

"Is that all?"

"That is all, my friend."

"Oh!" muttered the foreman, disappointedly.

"I trace your anxiety—you are somewhat interested in this important matter."

"I wouldn't be human if I were not."

"Then let me say this—for the present, no human mind can fathom the mystery of the Overland limited."

The foreman looked blank.

"That means no clew?" he murmured.

"That means not the slightest clew—in sight."

"Then you give it up, Mr. Carter?" exclaimed the foreman.

"Oh, dear, no."

"But you said——"

"I did not say that we shall immediately start in to find the clews out of sight—but I say so now. You are entitled to know all that is proper, my man, from your prudent handling of this affair in its first stages."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Carter."

"And I shall go out of my way to appease your curiosity when we have found out who murdered that fair girl in your private car, and why!"

Nick's cab was in waiting—he ordered its driver to take him and his assistant to the office of the superintendent of the road.

That official knew Nick, and was expecting him.

He had been kept advised of proceedings by the yard foreman, it appeared.

"Well, Mr. Carter, what have you found out?" he eagerly asked.

"A cold blooded murder."

"And the motive?"

Nick silenced the questioner with a look that made him realize the folly of that query at this early stage of the case.

"The girl was decoyed into the car, or carried there unknowingly," said the detective.

"But how was access gained to the coach?"

"From below—from underneath the car."

"I fail to understand."

"The compartment under the state-room is used to hold ice at times?"

"Yes—we utilize the space in that way."

"I fancied so. Overhead is a trap door. Underneath, the box has two slanting doors, padlocked together."

"You have the layout correct."

"Very well; through that channel entrance was effected to the car."

"Is it possible!"

"By the same course the murderer took his departure."

"Where?"

Nick lifted his eyebrows.

"You mean at what point of the line?"

"Yes."

"That is an intricate problem to solve."

"You give it up?"

"Hardly!"

"Then——"

"That is the one essential point in this entire affair, and that we must settle at the very start."

"Oh!"

"I therefore," continued Nick, "wish to have a brief interview with some person who can accurately give me the route of the limited on its last trip."

"I have the man for you."

"Familiar with its stops?"

"Entirely so."

"Its sidings and transfers."

"To the minutest particular."

"And aware of the general topography of the road?"

"Yes."

"Including branches?"

"Intimately; but what has that part to do with——"

"Everything."

"The course traversed is a matter of routine record," went on the superintendent. "The rest that you want to know will be easy, for the man I have in mind has been in the surveying department for years, and knows the road from end to end."

"And its connections?"

"Perfectly."

"He is my man," said Nick Carter.

The superintendent led the detective and his assistant to a little room, where a man was working on a map of the road.

The superintendent looked inquiringly at Nick, but the latter did not encourage him to stay.

Chick, however, lingered.

Nick was immediately engrossed with the new man.

He made him produce a time table and a map.

Mile by mile, minute by minute, in vivid retrospection, Nick Carter followed the Overland limited from one ocean to another.

This took a full half hour, but from Nick's drawn brows, knit in earnest thought, Chick comprehended that his superior was not wasting time.

"Very well," said Nick, at last, "I now thoroughly understand what it was necessary for me to know. Now then, presumably the Semiramis was not entered by either door from the time it left San Francisco till it arrived in Jersey City."

"No one had the right to enter it."

"Or the means?"

"I fail to understand."

"The keys?"

The man shook his head.

"The vice-president of course had the keys," he announced; "the yards at San Francisco and the yards here have duplicates."

"No other parties?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"Will you now get down your grade maps?" suggested Nick.

The other produced some large portfolios.

"And your mineral specimens yonder," said Nick, indicating a shelf stored with ore specimens, bricks, pottery, grain samples and the like, gathered along the line.

Chick's eyes sparkled; now he knew what his chief was after; he understood why Nick had investigated under the car.

Nick took out his memorandum book. Within twenty minutes, Chick estimated, he must have asked as many as four hundred questions.

The man was a perfect encyclopædia of knowledge as to the line of the road.

From New York to Chicago, thence west to the Pacific Ocean, he indeed knew every mile of the route in detail, as the superintendent had boasted.

Nick narrowed his inquiries down to the peculiarities of the soil of this and that section.

It was marvelous—the pointed way he saved time in asking questions.

The shrewd, intelligent surveyor divined his purpose, and promptly supplied the required information.

"Thanks," said Nick, finally.

"That is all you wish to know?"

"Yes—and you know your business thoroughly, my friend!"

Nick returned to the waiting superintendent, addressed a few words to that functionary, then he and his assistant regained the cab.

"Where now?" asked Chick.

"Home. I have a little careful studying to do."

In the quiet of his own favorite apartment, Nick Carter set before him on the desk a map of the road and his notes taken in the Superintendent's office.

He pored, pondered, traced with his finger, and Chick waited.

When Nick drew from his pocket and opened the envelopes Chick had seen him carry when he emerged from under the Semiramis, the latter felt that a decisive moment was about to be reached.

He craned his neck to view their contents as Nick slit the envelopes with a penknife.

A dark, incongruous mixture, resembling street sweepings, filled the various receptacles.

Nick examined them under his magnifying glass, and again consulted the map, his notes, his memoranda.

He looked up and nodded to Chick:

Nick moved a finger along the railroad line west five hundred miles, farther west yet, and still farther.

He stuck a pin through the map at a certain station.

He placed a second pin in position a hundred miles farther west.

"Between these two points," he announced, confidently, "the girl was decoyed or conveyed into the Semiramis."

"You know this——"

"Because a woman's dress swept off the sand and alkali dust from where the grease dripped fifty miles back."

"Ah!"

"Then came another formation—the red loam of a new soil. Where it began to form under the car, the murderer left the Semiramis."

"And you know this——"

"Because his hand, in relocking the padlock of the ice cavity, swept this in turn free."

Chick's silence enforced the infinite

admiration he felt for his gifted superior.

"Again," continued Nick—"at Foreston there was a stop, at Casco another. That is the only hundred miles answering to the dust formation I have described. Still further, a different fuel used on this stretch of road corresponds to certain cinder deposits. You have your clew, Chick."

"I have my clew?"

"You will start for the West on the night express, reach Foreston, work your way back to Casco, and try and get a trace of the start and motive of this extraordinary crime."

"And you?" hinted Chick.

"I shall look after this end of the case."

"But is there a New York end?"

"We shall see," said Nick Carter.

CHAPTER III.

IDENTIFIED.

"Wanted, sir."

Nick Carter's man-servant interrupted a reverie on the part of the great detective.

It was twelve hours after the discovery of the tragedy of the private car, *Semiramis*.

For three of that number Chick had been speeding West on the trail that Nick Carter's wonderful inductive mind had suggested.

Promptness was the essential of every move that the detective made in a case of urgency, and Chick had departed with a reasonably promising clew in sight.

Nick was thoughtfully scanning once more the contents of those six envelopes when the interruption came.

He looked up with the inquiry:

"At the telephone?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who is it?"

"The morgue people, I think."

The detective hurried his steps on hear-

ing this. The body of the victim of the private car tragedy had been taken charge of by the police.

Any word or inquiry in reference to the same was therefore naturally stimulating.

Nick's servant was right; it was the morgue people who wanted the detective.

By a special permit secured from a Jersey City coroner with whom Nick was acquainted, the detective had had the body of the girl transferred to the New York city morgue.

"Well, what is it?" demanded Nick, at the 'phone.

"Concerning the girl brought here this afternoon——"

"What about her?"

"A party has come to identify."

"Good! Hold him."

"You will come?"

"At once."

Nick lost no time in seeing how far "the New York end of the case," as Chick had denominated a possibility, was going to materialize.

On arriving at the morgue, he was greeted by the man in charge—an old acquaintance.

The latter drew Nick mysteriously aside with a suggestive glance through the half-open door of the next room.

"He is in there—waiting," whisperingly declared the man.

"Who is?" inquired Nick.

"The party. You see, Mr. Carter, I fancied if there was going to be an identification you would wish to be on hand?"

"Most assuredly."

"So I sent for you."

"Quite right; but who is the person?"

"A likely young fellow, who, I fancy, is under considerable stress of anxiety over the disappointment of wife, sister or sweetheart."

"Has he seen the body?"

"Oh, no!"

"How did he happen to come here? The case is not public yet."

"He says he has been seeking everywhere. I got him to describe the person he was looking for."

"And he did so?"

"Guardedly."

"Does it tally?"

"It does, for a fact."

"You did not tell him so?"

"Not I; I sent for you."

"That was right."

A young man was pacing the floor of an adjoining room, his hands twisting nervously behind him, his head bowed in thought or suspense. He looked up quickly as Nick entered.

"Good-evening, sir," remarked the latter.

The detective traced at once genuine anxiety and dread in the fine, fearless face of this stranger.

"You are the person they sent for?" inquired the young man, his voice unsteady and strained.

Nick bowed.

"They tell me," said he, "that you are looking for somebody?"

"Yes."

"A young lady?"

"Yes."

"She has disappeared from home?"

"Yes."

The answers were prompt as well as short; Nick intuitively surmised that his visitor had something to conceal.

"Under what circumstances?" he demanded.

The detective's companion hesitated.

"Must I tell you that?" he inquired, his brows meeting in a troubled frown.

"Would it not be the better way?"

"If it is—if it is she," said the other, "I will do so gladly. But if not——"

Nick looked inquiringly, as there was a pause.

"I do not think it would be right to

make public the troubles of the family of my employer."

"Your employer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well," said Nick—"you may enter."

He pushed open the door leading down three stone steps into a room chill and dank.

"Here," he said, briefly—and he watched closely the young man's face.

The visitor darted a wild glance at the slab Nick had indicated.

A strangling cry gurgled in his throat.

He staggered back against a pillar, covering his eyes with his hands.

"Do you identify this person?" asked Nick.

"This! this!" incoherently gasped the visitor. "Yes—it is she!"

"You are positive?"

"Her hair! her face——"

"Look again."

The young man uncovered his eyes. A spasm passed over his ashen face.

He fixed his gaze once more upon the slab—upon the silent, beautiful burden it bore.

"Great heavens! why! it is not——"

"Be calm, man."

Crash!

In the midst of some excited utterance, the visitor threw himself forward as though to scan more closely, and his eyes now were half starting from his head.

Unfamiliar with the smooth, slippery floor of the place, he lost his footing.

Nick sprang to his side, but too late to prevent a heavy fall.

The visitor's head met the edge of a solid stone block, which cut quite a gash, and completely stunned him.

Nick lifted him up, called for the keeper, and they bore him into the outer room.

"He fainted?" interrogated the keeper.

"He fell," explained Nick. "This is quite serious. Is there any convenient?"

"Better send him home," advised the keeper.

He did what he could to staunch the blood, while Nick proceeded to find out if the young man's home was anywhere near.

The contents of a wallet found in a side pocket indicated that the sufferer was named Dean Bentley.

His employer was one Aiden Lee.

The address of the latter was given—it was a good residence locality not far distant.

"Yes," said Nick, finally, "I will take him home."

"Call a cab?"

"If you will."

"Did he identify the body?"

"He seemed to."

Nick answered thus, but he stored in his mind the interrupted declaration made at a second look.

His charge did not rally during a brief rapid drive.

Nick got the cabman to dismount and watch his insensible fare, while he went up the steps of a fairly pretentious residence.

A ring at the door bell brought a servant, and an inquiry as to Mr. Aiden Lee the announcement that he was at home.

Nick expressed urgency, and the servant showed him into a room where a man in a dressing gown was seated before a grate fire reading the evening paper.

He arose to greet and survey the caller with a keen, surprised look.

He was a man of about sixty, undersized and with eyes that were never still for a moment in their snappy, restless brilliancy.

"Be seated, sir," he invited.

"I presume that a young gentleman named Dean Bently is known to you?" inquired Nick, promptly.

"Certainly."

"He is a clerk in your employ?"

"Yes."

"I have him at the door, in a somewhat precarious condition."

"You alarm me!" said Lee, arising to his feet.

The tones belied the sincerity of the statement—still, Nick could not at once entirely fathom those shifty surface indications.

"He has sustained a severe fall."

"When?"

"Half an hour since."

"Where?"

"At the morgue."

"At the morgue?"

"Yes."

Lee was genuinely surprised.

"What was he doing at that dismal place?" he inquired.

"He seemed to be looking for a friend."

"Ah!"

"A young lady."

"Hah!" uttered Lee in a sharp gasp.

"He found her."

"He——" exclaimed Lee, with a violent start and stare.

"I say that he seemed to find her."

"Impossible!"

"Then you knew that he was looking for somebody?"

"I—that is, certainly I knew."

"Suppose, then, that you explain?"

"Who are you, may I inquire?" demanded Lee.

"My name is Carter," said Nick, fixing an unflinching eye on his host.

"Carter!"

"Nicholas Carter," continued the detective—keeping his eyes fixed.

Lee had sprung to his feet. His eyes dilated, his nostrils expanded and quivered.

"The mention of my name seems to disturb you?" intimated Nick.

"Not—not at all, sir!" declared Lee, with a gulp.

"Possibly it suggests——"

"That is it!" interrupted Lee, regaining some of his lost poise. "It suggests—how can it fail? You said explain. I will. Poor girl! I can see it all! She is dead!"

The speaker brushed one eye with his hand.

"Briefly, sir," he said, after this little tribute to emotion, "I have a ward."

"Yes?"

"Or rather, had one."

"Her name, may I inquire?"

"Lura Mason. She has been with me for some weeks. She left home under mysterious circumstances. We sought her; she had disappeared, leaving no trace."

"And this young man, Mr. Bentley?"

"They were warm friends; he has probably taken it on himself to search for her."

"I could not find his address among his papers. Shall I bring him in here?"

"Certainly; he is a worthy young man, a most deserving person."

Lee bustled about. He gave some directions to the servant. With Nick's assistance the young man was conveyed to a room up stairs.

Nick went below and awaited the return of his host.

When the latter appeared, he said to him:

"You had better send for a doctor."

"I have done so—he shall have all due attention. I have fully instructed the servant."

"Then, meantime, could you accompany me?"

"Where?" shot out Lee, abruptly.

"To the morgue."

"I must go there?"

"You must. The identification by your clerk was rather vague."

"Ah!"

"There may be a mistake—the body was found under peculiar circumstances."

Lee regarded his visitor keenly.

"Under peculiar circumstances?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"How so?"

"It was discovered in a car—in a private coach."

"What!" exclaimed Lee in profound astonishment.

"Alone, in a car that had left San Francisco locked up securely, and with no one aboard."

Lee stood riveted—his jaws began to fall.

It was impossible to exactly trace his emotion—whether it was caused by excitement or disbelief.

"Murdered," supplemented Nick, briefly.

Lee's face was whitening steadily. He did not tremble, but his fingers had expanded till they stood out rigid as pieces of steel.

Nick was quite calm, and courteous—but back of his calmness was a vividly aroused sense of caution.

"You are shocked," he said, "it is natural. Ah! Mr. Lee—one question."

His host tried to speak, failed, and only bowed.

"When did your ward disappear from your home?"

"Last night."

"Oh! then——" began Nick, and checked himself.

What the astute detective might have said was this:

"Then the girl at the morgue cannot possibly be your ward."

What shrewd, far-seeing Nick Carter did say was:

"Ah! indeed? Then your ward must have been murdered in Jersey City and was stowed in that private car after the coach arrived."

For Nick Carter had suddenly entertained a thought, a suspicion, that until that moment had not presented itself to his mind.

CHAPTER IV.

A STRANGE MESSAGE.

Lee looked up quickly at the detective with the air of a man immensely relieved.

"Yes, that must be it!" he said.

"You mean?" insinuated Nick.

"My ward was murdered here, and her body stored in that car."

"The car just arrived on a three thousand miles flying trip this morning."

"She has not had time to get far from the city. It must be as you say. It is terrible! terrible!"

Lee sank to a chair and passed his hand over his face several times.

"Be seated," he directed in a low tone.

Nick secretly confessed to an immense spur of stimulation.

The "New York end" of the puzzling tragedy of the private car was developing—fast.

"I wish, Mr. Carter," said Lee, flashing another of those covert looks at his visitor's face—"I wish in this case to be considered your client."

"The police department is already my client, in a way," explained Nick.

Lee's eyes wavered, as if with disquietude.

"That is true," he said, "I am sorry affairs have come about as they have. I waited too long. This terrible ending! I never anticipated it."

"Explain yourself," suggested Nick.

"To begin at the beginning, then——"

"That is the best way," assured Nick.

"I am a man of some wealth and standing, though for only a short time resident in New York."

Nick inclined his head to show attention.

"I do something in the stock-dealing line. Several weeks since my ward came to me. She is an orphan. From the first she acted strangely."

"How—strangely?"

"She had no interest in society or the outside world."

"And the reason?"

"Natural diffidence, combined possibly with natural grief over the loss of a sister."

"When did her sister die?"

"About six months ago."

"Where?"

"Eh? Oh! Where? Out West."

"Out West, eh?" muttered Nick—to himself.

"My son——"

"You have a son, then?" inquired Nick.

"My son," continued Lee, "was much attached to the young lady. Before he went away——"

"He is away?" interrupted Nick, bound to press all points closely.

"Since two weeks ago."

"And where," inquired Nick, "is he at present?"

"Why—he is out West."

"Out West, too!" silently chronicled the detective.

"He was very much in love with my ward. But the attachment was too brief to have any bearing on the present affair."

"I see. And how about your clerk, Mr. Bentley?"

"Well, to be candid, I think he also fancied my ward."

"Did she regard him with favor?"

"I do not think she was sufficiently impressed, so far as affairs had gone, to decide that."

"Indeed. Go on, sir."

"Lura disappeared yesterday evening in a queerly sensational and mysterious way."

"How was that?"

"She gave no warning."

"She had not acted out of the common previously?"

"Not at all."

"Proceed."

"At eight o'clock we found her bedroom window open."

"She had left by it?"

"From the second floor."

"Not passing through the house, either by front or rear?"

"No."

"That is singular," commented Nick.

"She stepped down a slanting roof, and through the lane at the back of the lot."

"You found this out?"

"Beyond a doubt."

"How?"

"A neighbor saw her drop from the roof. A second noticed her enter a waiting carriage. She gave a nod to the driver, and it flashed away."

"Then all her movements were preconcerted?"

"It seems so."

"And you do not know her motives?"

"I am completely at sea."

"You have no idea of her intentions?"

"Not the least in the world."

"This is all very mysterious," said the detective.

"If she had some secret lover, now——" hinted Lee.

"You don't know that?"

"No, I simply suggest it—if she had such——"

"Well?"

"I never suspected it."

"We will go over all this later," remarked Nick.

"Yes," spoke Lee, with real or affected fervor—"I employ you at any cost and trouble to run down this dark mystery!"

"Thanks."

"I engage you to avenge this poor girl's inhuman murder—if she has been murdered."

"Very well—I shall consider myself engaged," said Nick, dryly. "We will now go to the morgue."

"It is a distasteful proceeding!"

"But necessary."

They passed down the steps of the house. Nick had ordered the cab to wait. They proceeded towards it.

A large, sinister-looking man set his foot on the first of the house steps as they reached the cab.

Lee ran back to speak to him. What he said Nick could not hear.

The stranger started up the steps. Lee came back and entered the cab.

"That was the doctor," he explained to Nick.

"The one you sent for?"

"Exactly."

"What doctor is he?" inquired Nick, bluntly.

"His name is Somes."

"I do not recall it."

"Oh! he is not in local practice," Lee hastened to say.

"Is he a suitable person, then?"

"I vouch for him—peculiarly so."

"Indeed?"

"He was a military surgeon for years. He is my close friend, and he will do more than a stranger would do for my unfortunate employee."

Nick said nothing, but he reflected. In due time they reached the morgue.

Nick tried to read what was stirring behind the set face of his companion as he ushered him into the room where the dead girl lay.

But Lee wore a mask he could not penetrate—those shifty, gleaming eyes never allowed a fair, square look.

He was only a trifle pale, not otherwise openly affected, as he cast a glance at the murdered girl.

"It is she!" he said in a low, sad tone.

"Your ward?"

"Yes."

"You positively identify this person as the missing Miss Lura Mason?"

"Oh, certainly!" declared Lee.

They passed out into the main room of the place.

"There are some formalities to observe——" remarked Nick.

"Yes?" interrupted Lee in a flustered, expectant way.

"Who else knew the deceased intimately?"

"Why, very few, in fact—the servant at my home."

"And your clerk, this young Bentley."

"Yes," nodded Lee, shortly.

"Then both must come here to-morrow and identify the deceased."

"I thought my clerk had already done so."

"He might have been on the point of a decisive identification," said Nick, "when he met with his accident."

"I see."

"He will probably be sufficiently recovered by morning to make a second visit here."

"Possibly."

"I will call at your home in the morning. Notify your servant and this young man that I expect them to accompany me to this place."

"Very well."

"You may then take charge of the body."

"Poor girl! And then, Mr. Carter, you will pursue this matter?"

"To the end—rest assured," promised Nick.

"Spare no expense!"

"I will keep your instructions in mind."

"Remember—I hire you!"

"Yes—you hire me!"

"And call on me for any amount to prosecute this investigation."

"I shall call on you."

They walked out of the place together, and regained the cab.

"You will take this gentleman home," said Nick, paying the driver.

"I shall see you to-morrow," observed Lee.

"Early in the morning."

"Very good."

Nick proceeded towards his own home. He was thoughtful, but it was under the pressure of crowding ideas rather than the dull reflections of an ordinary reverie.

When he got to the quiet of his own especial apartment, he prepared to analyze affairs in a clear, systematic fashion.

"First and foremost," soliloquized the veteran expert, "the girl at the morgue is not the ward of this Mr. Aiden Lee."

"Secondly, Mr. Aiden Lee knows it."

Thus far Nick had got when there came a violent ring from the telephone closet in the next apartment.

Nick proceeded thither. He took up the receiver.

"Who is it?" he inquired.

"Mr. Nick Carter?"

"Yes."

"This is Lee."

"Oh!" said Nick, recognizing the voice.

"I hoped to catch you—I fancied you would like to know."

"About what?"

"The young man."

"Your clerk?"

"Yes."

"What about him?"

"The doctor says he is permanently injured."

"Indeed?"

"That he will not be able to attempt any second identification to-morrow."

"I am sorry to hear that," said Nick.

"Have your servant ready, at all events."

"Yes. Mr. Carter. Good-night."

"Good-night."

Nick quite mechanically continued to hold the telephone receiver.

Grim suspicions were being suggested. In the midst of one particularly vivid and arousing, he replaced the receiver to his ear.

A crackling vibration led him to be-

lieve that some one had resumed talking at the other end of the line.

"Hello! hello!" were the exclamations Nick heard.

The utterance was sharp, cackling, peculiar.

Its accents quite puzzled the detective.

"Hello!" he called back.

"Crackers!"

"What's that!"

"Oh, ring off!"

"What is this jumble, anyhow?" muttered Nick.

"Blind him! do you hear? blind him! blind him! blind him!"

"Strange!" breathed Nick, listening interestedly.

Then his eyes snapped, and with eagerness he strained his hearing afresh.

"Bad break—detective—hush it up! There's been a miss——"

Nick stood like a statue amid the deep stillness, broken only by those strange, startling sounds——

"There's been a miss—out West!"

CHAPTER V.

A PARROT AT THE TELEPHONE.

Nick waited for more over that tell-tale wire.

A shrill screech concluded.

A jangle vibrated. Nick stood still, waiting like one in the darkness listening at a partition.

Suddenly the telephone bell rang.

"Hello! Mr. Nicholas Carter?"

The tones were those of Lee.

Nick paid no attention.

A second ring followed; then the current was shut off.

Some vivid pictures filled the detective's acute fancy as he stood there, silent.

He could trace the mystic and unique happenings at the other end of that wire as clearly as though he were actually looking into the room containing the telephone instrument at the home of Mr. Aiden Lee.

"Mr. Aiden Lee keeps a parrot," observed Nick.

A bird that was a pet, a marvel of cunning shrewdness must the parrot in question be, Nick decided.

Its imitative faculties had lured it to try telephoning immediately after its owner had got through talking with Nick.

What it had said it must have overheard—and recently.

It had imparted a whole volume of suggestions to the quick-thinking expert.

Its proceedings had been discovered by its master; that cackling screech was the terror cry of a culprit under punishment.

The hail from Lee immediately following had been an experiment.

Lee had endeavored to ascertain if by any chance Nick might have caught the tell-tale babble of the bird.

"He is probably completely assured on that point!" grimly murmured the detective as he re-entered his study.

Nick proceeded to analyze what the parrot had imparted.

"It may mean nothing," he observed; "it may mean everything."

"Blind him!" Who? If this young clerk, Bentley, were blinded, he could never identify the girl at the morgue.

"A bad break"—the discovery of a duplicate body?

"A miss"—in calculations focusing at some other point?"

Then Nick added:

"Out West!"

"Well," he concluded, with intense satisfaction—"Chick is out West!"

And Patsy and Ida, his two other clever, trustworthy assistants, were at hand and within call—probably ran through Nick's thoughts, though he did not say so aloud.

Nick went over to a framed contrivance set in the wall, resembling an annunciator.

The detective ran his household, professionally and otherwise, on a system that defied entanglement or inaccuracy.

The position of certain buttons and discs now before him indicated at all times the whereabouts of those whom he might wish to reach at any odd and unexpected moment.

At a glance Nick understood how he might find Patsy and Ida.

He interrupted his man-servant, who was enjoying a quiet smoke in a rear room.

To summon Ida Nick had simply touched a button.

Patsy was not likely to be at his end of the wire at that especial hour, the disc told Nick, but a messenger could find him by inquiring at a certain place.

With instructions to hunt him up and bring him in, the servant departed.

In about half an hour Ida put in an appearance.

Nick gave her a prompt outline of the case in hand.

"What am I to do?" she inquired, when Nick had concluded the main details of the tragedy, and the result of his investigations up to date.

"Trace back this girl, Lura Mason, as far as possible."

"Yes," assented the little lady detective.

"And the record of this Lee might furnish us some food for reflection."

"When do you want the information?"

"By morning."

Ida departed, understanding what she was expected to do, and knowing fully how to set at work without further directions.

When Patsy appeared, Nick repeated his story.

His young assistant was greatly taken with the layout.

"You want that parrot?" he instantly suggested.

"If procurable."

Patsy smiled with confidence.

"But I particularly wish to know how this Lura Mason left the house night before last."

"Very well," said Patsy.

Nick deemed it best not to reappear on the scene until the time arranged—next morning.

He had a thorough initial grasp on the situation, and with his able assistants at work, was not afraid of any important points getting away from him.

It was shortly before midnight when Ida returned.

Her business-like face and her matter-of-fact manner told Nick at once that she was ready with her report.

"What did you learn?" he interrogated.

"Much that is vague. A small amount with some degree of certitude."

"Give us plain facts, Ida."

"This Lee took possession of the estate of a man named Mason, a short time since."

"I see the connection—the father of this girl, Lura."

"Yes," assented Ida. "Mason had just come into this estate by the death of an uncle. Mason lived a bare month after coming into possession. He left his property to one Savage."

"How, then, does Lee come to possess it?"

"Going back; some five years ago, Mason went North with an exploring expedition, leaving behind him his motherless children."

"Girls?"

"Madge and Lura—twins. They were placed in the charge of two friends—a man named Savage, and this Lee."

"Keep on, Ida."

"Savage and his family moved West. The girl, Madge, accompanied them."

"And Lee?"

"Placed his charge, Lura, in a school somewhere near this city. Mason returned, inherited and died suddenly. His will left the entire estate to Savage, in trust, except a few thousand dollars to Lee."

"And Savage?"

"With his family, and the girl, Madge, he was swept out of existence by a cyclone out West only five days later."

"And then?"

"By the terms of the will, Lee inherited—that is, he had the use of the estate, its entire control, until the girl, Lura, became twenty-one years of age. That is all."

"It is more than sufficient," assured Nick.

"It gives some light?"

"Considerable, Ida. The girl, Madge, did not perish in the cyclone—it is her body that arrived on the Overland limited."

"You think that."

"I am sure of that. The girl, Lura, is alive."

"Let me search for her."

"I will decide to-morrow."

At the end of another hour Patsy arrived.

He had evidently been hard at work; his shoes showed traces of mud and dust.

He was perspiring, and he sank into a seat with a breath of satisfaction and comfort.

Nick nodded significantly for his assistant to begin.

"That parrot," declared Patsy, "is dead."

"They killed it?"

"It seems so, for I found it where it had been thrown—on a dirt pile under the window of the room into which the telephone wire runs."

"The same bird, then."

"Oh! of course. About the girl—she seems really to have left the house at the time given, eight o'clock Thursday evening."

"Stealthily?"

"There is no doubt of it. If it was a decoy, a trap, the trick was well set up, for she acted with great secrecy and caution."

"Explain?"

"I saw the neighbor who observed the girl leaving by the window and the roof."

"Her word is worth taking?"

"I am assured of it. Another person noticed the girl get into a carriage."

"Where was the carriage?"

"It had stood waiting in a narrow lane at the rear for some few minutes before the girl appeared."

"The second neighbor saw this?"

"And watched, prompted by curiosity. This lane at the rear is little used—mainly for coal delivery purposes."

Nick nodded understandingly.

"The girl must have been in a hurry, fearful of being recognized."

"Or stopped."

"Exactly—for she did not have the carriage turn and go back to the main street. On the contrary, the vehicle kept straight ahead, until it arrived within thirty feet of the end of the court."

"How was that?"

"A fence blocked—a light fence. I traced all this. This fence consisted of three boards strung horizontally from post to post. They had been removed."

"That evening?"

"I ascertained that, yes. Further, I traced the single wheel marks across a vacant space till another court was tapped."

"There, of course, the trail ended?"

"For good—only, by following this unusual route the carriage reached a

street quite a distance from the Lee home."

"That was the girl's object."

"Oh! doubtlessly, I went over the ground where the carriage had crossed, and after scouring all points critically, I learned that it was a four-wheeled, single horse conveyance, and rubber tired."

"Very good!"

"That the rear left spring was weak, judging from the depth of the wheel tracks."

"Anything more?"

"Yes—this."

Patsy produced an object from his pocket.

"Ah!" said Nick—"a horseshoe."

CHAPTER VI.

THE HORSESHOE CLEW

Nick appeared at the home of Mr. Aiden Lee the following morning, at eight o'clock.

The horseshoe that Patsy had given to him was in the detective's pocket.

Nick's assistant had found this caught in between a half sunken brick and a broken board.

It lay almost in the tell-tale wheel rut, and had apparently been violently wrenched from the foot of the horse toiling over the soft, uneven ground leading from the lane behind the Lee residence.

Lee confronted the detective with the calmness of a man who feels sure of his cards and is steeled to play a cool game.

He rather effusively greeted his visitor as he led the way from the vestibule.

"Come up stairs, Mr. Carter," he invited.

"To see your patient, certainly. How is he?"

"Bad—very bad!"

"Is that so?"

"Abrasion—I mean concussion of the skull."

"Your doctor says that?"

"Definitely."

"Then he will not be able to accompany me this morning?"

"No, and not for a good many mornings, if ever, the doctor says."

Nick was ushered into a dusky room, well shaded from the light.

He drew his own conclusion as he surveyed the figure on the couch it contained.

Bentley was a very sick man. Nick noted his extreme pallor and a flabbiness of lips and eyelids, while his hands moved about in a blind, groping way that suggested delirium.

"We shall have to do with the servant's identification," said Nick.

They went below. Lee showed his visitor into a sitting-room.

"I will tell my man to get ready," he remarked.

"By the way, while you are gone, could I telephone to my office?" inquired Nick.

"Certainly."

Nick, left alone in the adjoining apartment, pretended to send a message.

He gained his sole object—an inspection of the room containing the telephone.

A large empty cage hung not four feet from the instrument. Its door was open, and, beside it was a standard containing a perch.

This was just about the height of the telephone.

From it, too, there was every advantage afforded for the use of the instrument by the clever bird in the way Nick had pictured it out.

The servant accompanied Nick to the morgue; he identified the body of the girl lying there as "Miss Lura Mason."

To this Nick did not attribute any importance whatever; he considered the servant's loyalty to home instructions to be indisputable.

The detective's present object was to throw dust in the eyes of Mr. Aiden Lee until he had secured a surer grasp of the complex situation.

Nick sent word by the servant to his master that he would see him later in the day.

Then the veteran detective began some brisk characteristic work.

Its first step comprised a visit to an old lady residing in Brooklyn.

From Ida Nick had learned the residence of the young clerk.

This woman was his aunt, and Nick soon led her around to his way of think-

ing, without letting her suspect that he was concealing his real motives.

He described the condition of her nephew, and narrated the circumstances preceding his indisposition, in a way that softened the shock as much as possible.

She was to secure a physician and proceed to the Lee home, insisting on the immediate removal of her relative to her own rooms.

Nick started this section of his plans in working action.

About noon he returned to the house in Brooklyn, and found that the patient had been removed.

Lee had tried to put some barriers in the way, but the old lady was determined, as Nick had incited her to be.

Her own physician had now the case in hand. Nick secured his address and called at his office.

"What do you find the patient's condition to be?" inquired the detective.

The doctor regarded Nick hesitatingly. He knew who he was, for Nick had told.

"Professionally, between us both——" he began.

"Of course," nodded Nick.

"There are some queer points about this matter."

"Shall I give my idea of a few of them?" suggested Nick.

"Why——"

"Bentley's injury is in itself nothing dangerous."

"You take the expression right from my lips!"

"Ah!" smiled Nick.

"Next, his medicines have been rather—confusing, shall we call it?"

"You diagnose the case like an expert, Mr. Carter!"

"No," confessed Nick—"I simply guess."

"Sir!" burst forth the doctor, unrestrainedly, "we understand one another! My patient has been vilely drugged—and without the least excuse for it."

"That accounts for his 'delirium.'"

"But what appalls me," proceeded the doctor excitedly, "is that he has also been blinded."

"He has been blinded, has he?" pressed Nick.

"He certainly has."

"Through medicinal means?"

"Yes."

"Permanently?"

"Fortunately, seeing that he has been——"

"Rescued?"

"Yes, rescued in time, I can safely answer—no. Mr. Carter, I must make a remark!"

"Make it."

"It looks amazingly certain to me that the people who have had Mr. Bentley in their charge have attempted little less than murder!"

"Doctor," said Nick, mysteriously, placing an impressive hand on the physician's arm and looking him straight in the eyes, "keep that to yourself, will you?"

"It is only a suspicion, so I am bound to."

"Till I see you again."

"Ah!" exclaimed the doctor, with a hopeful look.

Nick left that branch of the matter at this point of progress.

If proof had been lacking to verify various suspicions as to the villainous nature of Mr. Aiden Lee, it was at hand now.

"I have to deal with a scoundrel by nature," reflected the detective as he pursued his way. "Now to probe for the cue that will explain the sudden and mysterious disappearance—the whereabouts or fate—of Miss Lura Mason."

Nick suggestively touched the horse-shoe in his pocket as he spoke.

He did not need to look at it to remind him of anything.

When Patsy had produced that ungainly object the night previous, the detective had at once recognized its importance.

In his skilled hands it at once became a pointer, a clew, and that, too, of no mean proportions.

To its outlines, its mechanism, its shape, its size, its peculiarities, Nick had given the strictest attention.

To trace down a horseshoe entirely ordinary in its character among the numerous thousands of horseshoes in New York city, would have been an impossibility.

But this was a horseshoe out of the common in more ways than one—fortunately.

It had been worn by an animal—Nick's horse knowledge told him—that was foreshortened, besides having a defect in its left hind hoof.

To that hoof this shoe belonged. To equalize pressure and ease the foot, a peculiar piece of rubber had been inserted at one side of the shoe.

This was held in place by a new-fangled skeleton clamp.

The shoe also bore the marks of a new patent brand.

Nick Carter put in four industrious hours running down the clew in hand.

His investigations led him to two veterinary surgeons, to a manufacturer, to a wholesale hardware establishment.

Then followed a tour of customers—a visit to grimy blacksmiths without number.

Nick did not know all the ins and outs of veterinary science, of artistic horse-shoeing, but he did know aptly how to put in play the agencies to bring about results in these lines.

At exactly five o'clock that afternoon—four hours after starting forth on his difficult and extraordinary quest—the skilled secret service man had scored a success.

Nick had found the blacksmith who identified the shoe.

And this man gave him the address of the person who drove the horse to which that shoe belonged.

Ten minutes later the detective entered a stable yard where a man was just hitching up a horse.

This animal had a new shoe on its left hind foot.

Nick noticed, too, that it had a defect in the hoof, and was foreshortened.

The tires of the vehicle, a cab to which the man was attaching the horse, were rubber shod.

The detective had found the vehicle that had conveyed Miss Lura Mason so mysteriously from the Lee residence two nights previous.

Nick entered the yard, and with a pleasant smile approached the man.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CLOSE TRAIL.

"Busy, my man?" inquired Nick in his blindest tones.

"Me? Well, no," returned the cabman, "except regular stand work."

"I should like to engage you for two hours."

"Good, sir!"

"To drive under directions."

"Nothing easier."

"I shall want to sit on the box with you."

The Jehu stared at his peculiar employer, but he said:

"I'll try and make room for you."

"And lend me one of your big, warm ulsters there?"

"Why——"

"Which will make it double fare."

This announcement won the cabman's prompt assent.

Nick made a choice of one of three more or less dilapidated but capacious great coats that he had noticed hanging up in the harness room.

The man got his rig in driving shape. Nick crowded into the seat with him.

"Now, sir, what point do we make for first?" he asked, briskly, snapping his whip.

Nick named a street.

Then he added:

"I'll show you when we reach it."

The driver had not a suspicion as to the detective's real object as Nick lucidly directed and guided until the cab had fairly reached the exact point where it must have emerged from the blind lane, with Miss Lura Mason a passenger, two evenings previous.

"Stop here," ordered Nick.

The driver looked vacantly about for some suggestions to the motives of his strange fare in halting.

None came—nor did his dull brain as yet discern the coincidence of localities.

Nick pointed to where the cab must have entered the street from across the vacant lot.

"Any thoroughfare there?" he asked.

"Eh—there? Why—no, not direct."

"Indirect?"

The driver looked puzzled.

"It's not even a road," he replied.

"Oh, you know that?"

"Yes, sir—I know it."

"From traversing it?"

"Once."

"Late?"

"Yes, night—— Hah!"

The driver gave a start. He faced Nick with a profound stare.

"Mister," he said, a surly wrinkle closing about the lips—"what are you giving me?"

"Two dollars an hour, it seems," announced Nick, with tranquility.

"You know what I mean!"

"I know what you meant—night before last. Just so," ran on Nick smoothly.

"Night before last you drove through that lot. You had a fare—a young lady. Good! that is our starting point."

Slowly the driver's hand clenched and unclenched its grasp upon his whip handle.

He never took his eyes from Nick's face.

The detective met his look unruffled.

Then the superior cowed the inferior nature, and the driver turned his glance aside, muttering:

"I don't like this!"

"Don't like what?" asked Nick.

"The way you act."

"I hired you, did I not?"

"Well——"

"Now then, you can go on with the job or drop it, just as you like."

"What is the job?" gruffly demanded the driver.

"You agree that you started from here on Thursday night with a young lady in your cab."

"Maybe."

"Oh! no maybes—that won't satisfy me."

"Yes—then."

"What I want you to do is to take me, foot by foot and street by street, the direct course you took her."

"What's your purpose?"

"Oh! never mind that."

The cabman reflected.

"See here," he said, finally, "it's not because I'm afraid——"

"Of course not."

"I don't like the way you come at it."

"Ah! indeed?"

"I'm a straight man. I never give away a customer, but no more do I take a hand in any crooked customer's business."

"Being a straight man, then," said Nick, "suppose you answer a few straight questions?"

"I'll see. What do you want to know?"

"Who hired you to drive that young lady?"

"She, herself."

Nick was surprised at this answer.

"That is true?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir, it is."

"When?"

"Late last Thursday afternoon."

"How did she find you?"

"She was on the street—at that corner yonder. She came up to me, made an arrangement for me to be in the lane at eight o'clock, and paid me. I was there."

"You must have seen that she was up to some secret business."

"I suspected it."

"Amounting to flight, the way she made you go across this lot."

"Well, I was started then."

"And where did you take her?"

The cabman hesitated, pondered.

Nick had long since decided that he was telling the truth—was, indeed, "a straight man."

The cabman said suddenly:

"I judge it's your turn now."

"What to do?" inquired Nick.

"To answer a question or two."

"Very well—start in."

"Why do you want to know all this?"

"I have been asked by the young lady's friends to look her up."

"There's no harm meant her?"

"Do I look like a man who would harm a frightened, fugitive child?" challenged Nick.

"You don't—and I don't think you'll find her; but I'll take you to where I took her."

"That is what I want; but why do you say that I may not find her?"

"The place I took her to struck me as being a mere temporary place of meeting with some one."

"Never mind; do your duty."

"I hope it is my duty; she was a nice girl!"

"I assure you that it is your duty."

"I'll take your word for it. Get up!"

The driver started his horse. Nick took quite a journey.

When they again halted, it was among a collection of bleak buildings over toward the North River.

Most of these had at one time been small factories and warehouses.

They had long since been abandoned, and no longer served for business purposes, and had therefore gone to wreck and ruin in the main.

One of them stood somewhat isolated.

All of its windows on the lower floor were boarded up; it looked as grim and forbidding as a jail.

The front door was of great strength and solidity, and had a key-hole as big as a man's finger.

"This is the place," reported the driver.

"You brought your fare here?" interrogated Nick.

"Right where I am stopping—the exact spot."

"What did the girl do?"

"She got out, and told me she had reached her destination. She went up to the door yonder and unlocked it."

Nick was again much surprised.

"She had a key, did she?" he asked.

"Oh, yes—a large key, brass, old-fashioned. I noticed it in her hand during the drive."

"Did she enter the place?"

"I am pretty sure that she did. At last, she opened the door. I drove off, for I saw her look towards me as if wishing me gone."

"That was your last sight of her?"

"Positively. I forgot all about her ten minutes later."

"Forget about her now," advised Nick, doubling the promised fee. "Family troubles, you see; we hope to trace her."

The driver was gratified. He drove away with many a pleased look back at his generous employer.

Nick approached the old building. Its front door was as firm as a rock.

It had a rear door of like stability, and the windows had been boarded up securely.

It was not impossible to force an entrance, but it would require something stronger than the picklock in the detective's pocket.

The weather was cold, but there had been no snow.

Frost was in the air, however, and as Nick looked about the small stone platform in front of the closed entrance,

traced the marks of footsteps made there at a not very remote date.

Nick studied the outlines of these.

"A woman, surely," he soliloquized—"and two—three men."

A rear inspection gave the detective further food for thought.

Light carriage wheels showed just beyond the doorstep.

If some one had passed through the house from a carriage, and out of it into another carriage, the trail could not have been any more perfect.

Nick did not believe that any one was at present in the building.

He fully shared the cabman's opinion that the place had been solely used as a temporary accommodation.

It was rather difficult to conjecture a reasonable explanation as to why the missing girl had used it as a place of appointment, and where she had got the key.

Nick speculatively passed over a little vacant space at the side of the structure.

He noticed in his path a real estate sign, which had been blown down or knocked down.

The board lay flat, free of its supporting post, and Nick lifted it upright.

It announced that the place was for sale—"at a bargain."

It directed the prospective purchaser to the owner:

"Aiden Lee," read Nick, with profound interest.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FROSTED PANE.

Some suggestive thoughts were in Nick Carter's active mind as he made the discovery of the ownership of the old river building.

The fact deepened the mystery surrounding the beautiful Lura Mason, but that only increased the detective's zest.

"I must see the inside of that building, of course," decided Nick, looking it over from top to base in a calculating way.

For a minute only Nick pondered. Then, resolving on a definite course, he left the scene.

After another cab ride, Nick found

himself at the door of the Lee residence half an hour later.

Nick noticed on the rack in the hall a large hat and a cloaked overcoat.

The detective believed that this belonged to Lee's "doctor" friend.

He felt sure, from the room into which Lee showed him, that a visitor he did not wish the detective to see had been sent into another part of the house.

But Nick intended to grasp no further entanglements for the present.

He went directly for the object primarily in view.

Lee propounded the unvarying informal query:

"What is new?"

"I have found out where your ward went to when she left this house," announced Nick, squarely.

"So!" exclaimed Lee, with a sudden start.

"Positively."

"And where is that?"

"To an old warehouse building near the North River."

Lee's shifty eyes began an animated twinkling, but he did not speak.

"A building, I believe, owned by you," continued the detective.

"Why! what—you amaze me, Mr. Carter!"

"It is there that she went."

"Direct?"

"Yes."

"You are sure?"

"Positive, as I say. She had a key, and entered the place alone. I found it locked up, but I discovered marks of more than one pair of footsteps at the front."

Lee's breath came manifestly quicker.

"This is passing strange!" he murmured. "What was she doing there?"

"And how did she get the key?"

"Yes—how!"

"You have the keys to the place in the house here?"

"I suppose I have."

"You don't know?"

"How can I, when I have not looked for weeks?"

"Will you look now?"

"Why, yes—certainly," said Lee.

There was hesitancy in his manner. Evidently he was unprepared for all that

Nick had told him, and his succeeding demands.

Nick noticed his eye move towards a desk in a corner of the room.

But Lee said:

"The keys are upstairs in my sleeping apartment."

"A queer place to keep them!" reflected Nick—and did not believe it.

Lee started, seemingly to learn about the keys, yet proceeded not towards the stair case, but into the next room.

Nick bent his ear closely. He fancied that he heard hurried whispering voices beyond the carefully closed barrier.

Noiselessly he glided up to the desk. To his satisfaction, he found the drawers unlocked.

The detective pulled out one—it was full of papers. A second, it was full of keys.

They belonged to the various buildings of the estate, he decided, and Nick looked only over the tags on those of the largest size.

He did not disturb them, although his eye gave a satisfied glow as he traced the writing on a tag attached to two large brass keys.

They belonged to the building at the river side. Nick closed the drawer and resumed his seat.

He was kept waiting about three minutes; then Lee reappeared.

"Gone," he announced, unblushingly.

"The keys are gone?" interrogated Nick.

"Yes."

"Very well—we shall have to do without them."

"What do you mean?" inquired Lee, in a startled way.

"You wish to solve the mystery of your ward's murder, I believe?"

"Most certainly."

"And run down the assassin?"

"At any cost."

"Then we dare neglect no clew."

"Have you one?"

"Have I not?"

"In that old building?"

"Precisely."

"I fail to see——"

"I know that the girl went there," said Nick. "She had the keys to enter it, I told you."

"Yes, they are missing."

"Why did she go there?"

Lee looked displeased, but he instantly said:

"I see what you are getting at. She knew about the building and where the keys were kept. Possibly she made an appointment with some one there."

"Of course."

"Met him—— Why, Mr. Carter! suppose it was there that the deed was done!"

"We must investigate; the inside of that old building may tell us quite a story."

Lee seemed to ponder anxiously at the suggestion.

"But we have no keys?" he intimated.

"That can be obviated," said Nick.

"How?"

"By any locksmith."

"Yes, that is true," admitted Lee, slowly. "Well, to-morrow morning——"

"No—now."

"It will be dark soon."

"So much the more need of diligence," observed Nick, sharply. "Come, Mr. Lee—I must insist on an immediate visit to that old building by the river."

"Certainly I will send for a conveyance."

"I have one in waiting."

They entered it some five minutes later.

Nick kept close track of his host till they were inside of it.

He theorized that Lee had not anticipated the recent disclosures. And he acted, too, as though an inspection of the old building might not be entirely agreeable to himself.

On the way Nick stopped at a locksmith's.

He found only the man's wife in the place, and came back to the cab unattended.

"Can't get him?" inquired Lee.

"No, but I have provided myself with the tools to effect an entrance," answered Nick.

Nick proved his assertion as they reached the old building.

He had worked less than two minutes at the strong front door when it came open.

The lower floor had three barn-like rooms. There was not so much as a stray

straw to break the monotony of absolute nothingness.

Nick had to employ his dark lantern below on account of the close shutters of the windows.

"Up stairs next," he directed.

This was found to be one room by itself.

It was chill and silent. The windows were thick with the frost of several day's formation.

Nick's companion glanced keenly all about the room, and barely repressed an utterance of satisfied relief.

"No murder done here, I'm thinking!" he briskly suggested.

"No signs of it at present, at least. Ah! step aside."

Lee had just stepped aside—with a purpose, Nick thought.

"What now?" questioned Lee.

Nick moved Lee's foot, to pick up a dainty lace handkerchief.

"I did not notice that; was I stepping on it?" muttered Lee.

Nick looked for an initial—he found an entire name—"Lura."

"Your ward's," he said, positively.

"I guess it is," admitted Lee.

"So—she was here."

"What good does that do us? If we had discovered that she had been murdered here before being conveyed into that private car, it might be something. But we haven't. Come—shall we go?"

"I suppose we may as well."

Nick took a final look around the place; Lee followed his example.

Suddenly Lee began to back toward a window, and Nick regarded him narrowly.

"Yes, nothing here worth our trouble," pursued Lee, lightly. "Well, we will go. Ah! what have I done?"

"You have broken a window," said Nick.

Lee drew back from the window, rubbing his elbow where it had struck the glass.

The detective said not a word, but his eyes ran keenly over the fragments of glass on the floor.

Lee now followed him down the stairs. They came outside.

"Well, what next?" he inquired in a half-bantering tone, as Nick secured the forced door as best he could.

"I hardly know," said Nick.

"Neither do I. We don't seem to make much progress. Coming back with me?"

"What is the use? By the way—will you drop these tools at the locksmith's?"

"Certainly."

Nick handed over the tools he had borrowed, and with a slight wave of the hand started briskly as if to leave the spot.

"If you make any new discoveries," flippantly called Lee from the cab window, "advise me."

There was the undercurrent of a sneer in the tones. Nick did not reply, neither did he feel the sting.

He walked on till the cab had moved out of sight.

Then like a flash he turned, setting his face back directly for the building he had just feigned to leave.

"Discovery, my friend?" muttered Nick, grimly—"I fancy I am on the brink of one that will put the handcuffs about your wrists, possibly the halter around your neck. Why did you break that window?"

CHAPTER IX.

ASHES!

The detective went back into the building he had just vacated.

Nick secured the front door from the inside, so that he would be advised of any attempt to enter.

Guarded from surprise by the capricious return of Lee, or accidental intrusion, he again penetrated to that upper room.

The fragments of the pane of glass which Lee had broken lay upon the floor.

The window sat back slantingly, and, although the pressure of Lee's body had been outward, the fragments had naturally fallen inside of the room.

Nick felt intuitively that something about that window had attracted Lee's attention.

Perhaps he was looking for evidences that might trip him up.

Certainly he had purposely broken the window.

His purpose was instantly manifest to

the keen-eyed detective as he knelt beside the shattered particles.

"Writing," said Nick.

A scroll in frost, a clew, a revelation, that window had borne—for here it was, though disjointed, before the detective's clear vision.

There were letters and words, though dim and vague.

They had been written into the frost, and over the indentations a second or third frost had formed.

These latter, however, had not obscured the original legend.

The shallow lines were easily traceable against the thick, undisturbed coating of the remainder of the pane.

Nick carefully set the broken pieces in order.

One or two fragments were missing, and one or two had their surfaces badly blurred by violent contact with the floor.

However, the careful expert quite fully reconstructed the pane as to its original shape and the continuity of the writing it bore.

Then Nick Carter "deciphered."

This was what he read:

"Decoyed — pursued. I am Lura Mason. Aiden Lee is a villain. Savage and my sister Madge are alive at——"

There the chronicle ended—not because any part of the original screed was missing, but because the writer had evidently been interrupted at this point.

It was a fatal break, but Nick Carter remembered Chick, and was half content.

It was a penible record, yet it had served its purpose.

For now the detective could construct a coherent theory as to the facts regarding the disappearance of the girl.

Tricked from the start, or tracked later on, she had certainly been discovered in this lonely building, and—disposed of.

Perhaps the frantic discovery of those she dreaded—ascending the stairs from below—had driven her to trace with battle or delicate finger tip the hopeless legend that Lee had sought to destroy.

There was an exasperating uncertainty and mystery concerning her motives in what she had done.

Nick felt that he must secure new light on this subject, and immediately.

The shades of darkness were settling

fast over the city as he left the old building for the second time.

Nick turned his face towards the Lee residence.

As promptly, half a dozen squares covered, he abruptly changed his course to an opposite direction.

Nick went home. He found even his man servant absent.

The detective, however, had no present need for either that personage or his assistants.

For all that, Nick proceeded to avail himself of some information Patsy had let drop while making his midnight report.

His mission had kept him for several hours in the immediate vicinity of the Lee residence.

He had discovered a secret way of entering—unguarded, unknown to its occupants.

Nick adopted a disguise, recalling Patsy's reference to that secret entrance.

One hour later the detective was prowling about the yard of the Lee residence, like a burglarious lurker.

A porch door—left carelessly unlocked since summer, it seemed—admitted him into an entry which had been turned into a kind of storeroom.

It was choked up with all kinds of rubbish, and Nick had no easy task getting up to the door at its other end.

This door was half glass. It was clouded with white paint.

This had worn off in streaks and splotches; at one corner there was a crack, ending in an orifice three-quarters of an inch in diameter.

Nick could therefore look into the room beyond; it was the sitting-room where he had first been ushered into the presence of Mr. Aiden Lee.

The room was lighted up, and was occupied, Nick at once discerned.

Two voices sounded, but one was at that moment indistinguishable by a tap at the door.

Then there was a sound as of a hurried exit of one of the persons in the room.

When Nick got closely up to the break in the clouded glass he saw that Lee was seated in a chair before the blazing grate, alone.

The hall door was just opening, and Lee was looking keenly over his shoulder

in its direction, his beady eyes twinkling with curiosity.

"This is the gentleman, sir," spoke the servant's voice.

The servant pushed, rather than ushered, into Lee's presence a nondescript figure, and, closing the door, retired.

Lee came to his feet with a black scowl on his face.

"This is what?" he exclaimed.

"Gentleman—don't it suit you?" impertinently demanded the intruder.

"You look like a stevedore!"

The intruder was dressed slouchily. His cap was as dirty as an iron-moulder's.

His soot-smirched face indicated an acquaintance with the close vicinity of the blacksmith forge.

"You are the person who insisted on seeing me, are you?" demanded Lee.

"Yes, I am."

"And who threatened, if not admitted?"

"I threaten now."

"What?"

"Oh, you'll know when I tell you that I have come for more money."

"More money!"

"Yes, captain."

"Did I ever give you any?"

"Slightly—twenty-five dollars."

"When?"

"Last Thursday——"

"Hah!"

"You understand now—for all my 'disguise?'"

"I think I do."

"I'm the man who spotted that girl, and watched outside that building near the river."

"I recall that you are. Well, what of it?"

"The money went quick."

"That is your business."

"I have come for more."

Lee started angrily for the table, where a call bell lay.

"Don't do it," advised the intruder, in a tone that was sufficiently sinister to call for consideration. "I don't want the money for nothing."

"Oh! don't you?" sneered Lee, hotly.

"I have something to sell."

"What?"

"A signature."

"A signature? Whose signature?"

"Miss Madge Mason's."

A frozen look came into Lee's face; he looked infinitely troubled and astonished.

"How did you get it?" he inquired, hoarsely.

"I picked it up."

"Where?"

"Outside the building—after you had forced the girl into that carriage. She dropped it—a letter from her sister, I fancy."

"Give it to me!" said Lee, extending an eager hand.

"For a hundred dollars—yes."

Nick was thinking hard—that letter would be of infinite importance to him.

Before he could have acted, however, had he been directly on the scene, the speediest bargain he had ever witnessed was struck.

Lee's hand went into his pocket.

Quick as a flash he drew out a roll of bills.

He ran over their ends, pulling away a section of the roll.

"There is your money," he said.

"There is your letter," said the other, opening one grimy hand holding a folded piece of paper.

Lee tore it open.

Nick's brows knitted.

Instantly the man he was watching flung the letter on the blazing coals of the grate, and it was consumed to ashes.

CHAPTER X.

THE CAGE AND THE CAPTIVE.

The audacious fellow who had made his demand and received his bribe backed to the door.

"You are harmless now—remember!" warned Lee.

"Correct, captain; I see no reason to trouble you again."

The man was a subordinate; his knowledge of Lee's plots was circumscribed, and probably wholly indicated by what Nick had overheard him say.

For all that, Nick resolved to retreat from his place of cover, get outside and nail the man before he left the street.

Something checked his purpose.

As the hall door closed on this man, the draperies at the end of the room parted.

There came into view a figure infinitely

of more interest to the detective than the alleged "stevedore."

It was, Nick judged from his flitting glimpse of the arrival of the night previous when he accompanied Lee to the morgue—"the doctor."

"The doctor," seen in the full light, was an immense man.

His giant muscles, his great hands, and his big head almost constituted him a monstrosity.

He flung himself into a chair, and it creaked under him.

"You heard?" said Lee in a testy tone.

"I heard," bowed the other.

"I don't like it!"

"A mere passing incident."

"It shows a flaw."

"Oh! there are such in schemes."

"But we may discover more!"

"Hardly, unless——"

"Well, what?"

"Your gall in hiring Nick Carter takes a rebound."

"Oh, I can manage him," predicted Lee, confidently. "It was the only way to throw dust in his eyes. For all that, I am going to change my plans."

"All right," nodded the doctor, who seemed to be a very accommodating person.

"Bentley's blindness has prevented him from discovering that the girl at the morgue is not Lura in reality."

"That is well."

"Nick Carter has accepted as final and authentic my identification and that of Grimes. We bury the body—that ends it."

"How does it end it?"

"Why, I keep on realizing—I have the right to do so."

"That can't be disputed."

"At my leisure. It will be a year before, according to the terms of the will, I must turn in an account."

"Yes."

"Before a year, I think I will have gathered in about all that is material."

"And vanish?"

"Can you suggest anything better?"

"Well, as only a few thousands come to you by law—no. But you have forgotten something, though," observed the doctor.

"Have I?"

"Something important."

"What is that?"

"The girl herself. You prove her dead, and here she is, very much alive, and on my hands."

"You don't complain?"

"Not with my salary running on—I should say not! But what about your son?"

"Warren—that is a vexatious question. I have thought it over. He is really struck on her; he would let the money slide to get the girl."

"Let him have her, then."

"I've thought of that. She can't stay here. With what she knows, what would her liberty mean for us?"

"Then you suggest——"

"That you take her out West."

"To where your son is?"

"Yes. He telegraphed us 'Songster.' By that we know the girl Madge has been settled—though how in the name of wonder she came in that private coach is a puzzler! I expect that last code word now——"

"'Vulcan?'"

"That means that Savage has followed suit."

"Ah! he will."

"It is necessary. The girl Lura has balked our original scheme, but it leaves me in control long enough to gather up the cash."

"I am to take Lura to your son?"

"With your science, that ought to be an easy task."

"That part doesn't trouble me."

"What does, then?"

"How is he to manage her?"

"That is his lookout. If he thinks so much of her, let him get out of the country. You must make him aware of the change in affairs. When the cash dividends come in, of course he still has his share."

"Give me explicit directions as to how I shall find him."

"You will undertake the transfer of the girl?"

"I will get her to your son—that I promise."

Lee wrote on a strip of paper. He handed it to the doctor, who pocketed it.

"Unfortunate—this complication!" he muttered. "Who would have supposed that Savage and the girl escaped from that cyclone?"

"And that while you were posting your son to give the final quietus, the sister would write to Lura here."

"Which made it necessary for us to set up that trick. We intercepted her reply. We manufactured answers. She made the appointment to meet her sister—as she supposed, come to New York—in that old building. Well, she's in safe hands—with you."

"Rest assured of that!"

The big doctor arose—Nick Carter drew back from the glass door.

He was outside of the house before the doctor, and had to wait fully two minutes before the latter appeared.

Nick tracked him. The doctor led a chase of quite a distance.

He finally dove into a street made up of tenements.

Nick marked the building he entered, and later, standing in the shadow of the lower hall, distinctly traced his footsteps clear to the upper flight.

The mystery surrounding the disappearance of Lura Mason was now clearly known to the detective, as well as the main underlying plots of Lee and his confederates.

Nick deemed it hardly possible that the doctor would keep a prisoner in this building, where he apparently had a room.

Still, the detective could not afford to lose sight of him—especially with that paper in his possession that told of the whereabouts of Lee's son, the real murderous agent of the whole affair.

Nick reached the top floor. It was fifteen minutes before he had run down the room which the doctor had entered.

He made out the man through the key-hole, mixing up some decoction from a variety of bottles.

The great animal whistled and hummed as he labored at what Nick decided to be some drug intended to make his "scientific" journey out West a matter of ease and unconcern.

The room had no door beside the one at which Nick hovered, except that of what suggested a common clothes closet.

The detective assumed that the captive girl was in some other place, and that the doctor would soon leave his room and proceed to where she was.

Caution caused Nick to draw a dis-

ance away, but, at the end of half an hour, there being no movement of exit, he re-approached the door.

To his astonishment, he found the room empty!

Nick could not account for this; the windows looked out on a court seventy feet down; the man could not have disappeared that way.

It took Nick quite a little time to assure himself that the doctor had, indeed, disappeared.

He attacked the door with his pick-lock, and gained an entrance.

A light burned in the room. Nick had his ideas, and went straight for the closet.

The mysterious evanishment was explained—the closet encased a stairway leading to the roof.

Nick ascended it. Once aloft, he looked about him. Why had the man come hither, and where had he gone?

He had left his hat and coat in his room; he could not, therefore, have discovered Nick, and have sought to elude him by this roof route.

Suddenly Nick's eyes became fixed on a building across a court.

It was grim, tenantless as to the lower stories; an unused mercantile structure, it seemed.

A light showed beyond heavy shades in just one part—an isolated tower section.

Spanning from roof to roof was a stout ladder, a board within it and resting on the rungs. The thought occurred to Nick that this arch-schemer might have provided a prison place to which he could not possibly be directly traced.

Nick crossed the ladder. He came around a scuttle house, and paused abruptly.

Its door opened, and a man came out; it was the doctor.

His heavy steps crunched the gravel as he crossed over to where a medicine case lay, that he had probably brought with him from his room, but had not yet taken below.

His back was momentarily to the detective. Deftly Nick slipped around to the scuttle-house door; he slid rather than descended a flight of light stairs.

But he was compelled to halt at their bottom, somewhat at sea as to the most judicious course of procedure.

A barrier of boards shut out the floor below and the stairway.

This aerial nest was, indeed, isolated. Nick saw an open door leading through a corridor into a lighted room.

At either end of this entry were open doors, but heavily framed in iron.

The room into which Nick glided was like a vault, for the windows were doubly barred.

Nick had been forced to proceed thus, or stand and oppose the burly giant, for the latter was now descending.

The detective had discovered the secret cage. Was the bird within?

On a table stood a glass filled with some dark liquid, probably the decoction the doctor had prepared to administer to his victim.

Beyond it was a door. It had a two-foot grating in it.

The plotters had been at infinite pains, it seemed, to secure a tomb, a secure cell, right in the heart of busy New York.

A white face fluttered beyond the grating—startled eyes regarded Nick.

"Who are you?" whispered the detective, gliding to the spot.

"I am——" the weak voice hesitated.

"Lura Mason?"

"Yes!"

Nick turned—a door had slammed, jangled heavily.

Nick posed for the conflict of his life. A second door closed in like manner.

The veteran detective was shut in that small apartment, face to face with a gigantic demon whose hands suggested the destructive force of rock crushers.

"Who are you?" shouted the astounded doctor, his voice rising to a roar.

Nick did not answer. He flung himself bodily on the doctor.

The latter dodged, baring his heavy, hairy wrists.

Then ensued not a fist fight, but a succession of collisions of intense violence.

It was like the combat of the bear and the buffalo—a clinch, a fling.

Bones cracked; a hollow roar rang out. At last Nick, by a superhuman exercise of his iron muscles, had hurled the doctor ten feet into a corner.

He lay there, one wrist dangling; he glared up at Nick.

"Beaten!" he hissed.

"It looks so," said Nick, coolly.

The detective advanced, whipping out a pair of handcuffs.

"I'll foil you!" cried the doctor. "You are in, but how will you get out—through those iron doors? Ha!"

An object hurtled from his free hand—glittering metal; it was a key.

It passed between two bars where the window was open at the top, and dropped to the court far below.

"And this!" gritted the helpless, defeated one.

He pulled a wire at his side, just as Nick slipped on the handcuffs.

"You can't get out," he declared, "and in ten minutes, from where that wire runs, those will be here, those who will never let you out!"

Nick glanced about the room; his eye met the ceiling surface.

He drew a chair to the middle of the room.

Seizing the lighted lamp on the table, he removed its chimney.

Lifting the lamp, he allowed its broad, hot flame to play directly on the mercurial fire bulb sunk in the plaster.

"Ten minutes?" he observed, calmly. "Well, my friend, in five I will have a big crowd nere of my own—mostly friends!"

CHAPTER XI.

NICK CARTER'S "METTLE."

"What are you doing, Chick?"

"Waiting."

"For whom?"

"That man will do!"

It was in a room in a hotel at Casco that the colloquy took place.

Five days had passed since Nick Carter had wound up the New York end of the private car mystery.

Then had come a swift journey half way across the continent.

The paper that Lee had given the doctor had told Nick where his son Warren was.

Nick found his clever assistant awaiting him at Casco.

Chick had done some fine work; he expained it briefly.

The clues he had followed and the information his chief had run down, connected.

Chick was waiting for a man whom he had reason to believe had murdered the girl, Madge Mason, on the Overland limited.

This man had registered at the hotel under the name of "Swarrell," a week previous.

He had paid his bill in advance ; his baggage was still in his room.

In this one adjoining Chick had sat for three days.

He had lost the trail of the supposed murderer, but he felt positive he would eventually come or send for his traps.

Now, as he gazed from the window, he made the announcement to Nick that "something was ready to drop!"

Nick retained his seat; Chick posed in a half crouching attitude at the open doorway.

Footsteps sounded; they came nearer, nearer. Nick saw Chick describe a serpentine whirl.

The next moment, amid the sounds of a violent scuffle, he had dragged into the room a sportily-dressed man of about thirty.

"What is this!" shouted the latter.

Chick had flung him free; the man's hand shot to his hip pocket.

"None of that, my friend!" commanded Nick.

In a flash Nick had the fellow by the collar.

"Sure of this man, Chick?" he observed.

"Oh, yes!"

"It is not Swarrell."

"He was sent by Swarrell."

"Then he has——"

Nick made a deft plunge for the prisoner's pockets.

It was marvelous the celerity with which he ran them over.

"The key," said Nick, holding aloft the object for which he had searched.

Chick took it, examined it, and then passed from the apartment.

He came back with a settled look on his face.

"Let him sit down," he suggested to Nick.

The ruffian captive gave utterance to a violent hiss.

"What does this mean, I say?" he cried, wrathfully.

"This, my friend," said Nick. "We

suspected, and have found out, that you came to this hotel for some baggage in the room that key opens."

"What of it?" inquired the captive, an expression of surly suspicion gleaming in his evil eyes.

"Swarrell's room," put in Chick. "Do you happen to know who this Swarrell is?"

"Of course I do—he is my friend."

"That is a dangerous admission," observed Nick.

"Why is it?"

"Because your friend Swarrell, alias Warren Lee, is wanted for murder."

"Eh!" stared the fellow, sitting up rigid.

"And you as an accomplice in a murder," supplemented Chick.

Nick's hand closed in an iron grip on the arm of the prisoner, for, turning white as a sheet, the latter had directed a desperate look at the open window.

"I will tell you a story," said Chick.

"Some time ago an old man and a beautiful young girl took up quarters in a cabin beyond Casco, while awaiting replies to letters sent East."

The prisoner began to tremble.

"A few days later, a man appeared from the East named Warren Lee. He drew to himself two desperate men—yourself and another. He arranged a plot to murder the old man and the girl. In the melee the girl resisted. One of you three killed her."

"It was not I!" disclaimed the prisoner, wildly.

"You must prove that. To your pal the body was given to dispose of. He formed a visionary plan—the finding of the body thousands of miles away. He placed her in an empty private coach on the Overland limited."

The prisoner was silent.

"The old man was spirited away. Will you tell the rest?"

"What good will it do me?"

"If you did not strike the blow——"

"I did not."

"Then give us the information we want, and we will help you prove it."

"Agreed!"

"Where is this Lee, alias Swarrell?"

"With my pal and the old man."

"Is the latter living?"

"He was when I left the crowd—this morning."

"Where?"

The man told.

Six hours later, the wildest scene in Nick Carter's life was in progress.

Acting on information that Chick had already very nearly narrowed down to certainty, the two detectives had located the men they wanted.

They found Savage suffering from severe wounds, but with a probability of recovery.

Swarrell, alias Lee, took the alarm and escaped, while Chick arrested the third member of the murderous trio.

Nick started on the trail of Warren Lee, and captured him.

He got him to a town, secured a carriage, and started to convey him to Casco, where there was a safe jail.

Somehow, the information was circulated in the vicinity that the detective had in charge the assassin of the beautiful girl found in the private car, Semiramis.

Of a sudden, dashing through the streets of the town, Nick found himself in the midst of a crowd.

"Drive on!" he ordered, recognizing instantly unmistakable evidences of the lynching fever.

The vehicle started forward.

Abruptly it halted with a shock, a jar.

One of the mob, a brawny blacksmith, had aimed the sledge hammer he bore at one of the horses.

It struck the animal direct in the centre of the forehead, and the horse fell like an ox at the shambles.

"Stand back!" ordered Nick, sternly, as fierce hands reached out towards the carriage door.

"No!" dissented a stentorian voice.

"This man is my prisoner."

"We have our own way of dealing out justice to murderers!"

Nick stepped from the carriage—his craven prisoner cowed at his side.

"Gentlemen," said the detective, "I have contracted to land this man safely in jail—and I intend to do it!"

A chorus of hoarse, derisive laughs went up.

"You don't know our mettle, stranger!"

"You may not realize mine!"

A whisper went round as a new-comer

caught sight of the dauntless face of the famous detective.

The crowd repeated two words—one name:

"Nick Carter!"

It was a magic password.

"Pass on, Nick Carter," said the brawny smith—"we'll trust you to see justice done!"

Justice was indeed done—full and complete.

The wretch, Lee, had a brief trial and a short shrift.

His father and the doctor stepped from profligate affluence to the dungeons of Sing Sing.

Beautiful Lura Mason sincerely mourned the loss of her unfortunate sister, and in Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn, erected a graceful monument over her remains.

Lura found peace, security and fortune, restored to the companionship of the man she loved and that of the guardian whom Nick Carter had virtually rescued from the grave.

[THE END.]

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